

International Conference Rijeka (Croatia)

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*“Tackling the Impact of Cults and Cult-like Behaviours in the Australian Society”
(Read by Tom Sackville)*

Church of Scientology Speech

I would like to thank the organisers for asking me to provide this text for your conference.

I apologise for not being able to attend, but my Parliamentary commitments in Australia sadly do not permit the time away.

I thought I would start by highlighting how I became involved in pursuing legislation which would attempt to address the damage done by cults in my home country.

It began when I was doing a fairly routine interview with the Australian television Current Affairs Program called 'Today Tonight'.

The interview was actually about another subject, but right at the end, the journalist (Bryan Seymour), asked me about the tax exempt status of organisations like Scientology.

I told him I had some concerns about how these tax exemptions were decided upon, and which groups were able to access them under current regulations in Australia.

A week or so later, I believe, the story went to air, and almost instantly I was flooded with emails from people who said their lives had been affected by most notably the Church of Scientology, as well as some other groups.

The stories were horrendous.

Around the same time I was deeply concerned about a story which ran in an Australian newspaper which detailed the circumstances surrounding the Coronial Inquest into the death of former soldier and Scientologist Edward McBride.

Coroner John Lock had requested personal records of Mr McBride held by the Church of Scientology as part of the inquest but these documents were not forthcoming.

Instead they were shifted by the organisation from Brisbane to Sydney and then on to the United States.

I began to wonder, whether Australia's laws affecting cults were not strong enough, or whether certain organisations were acting like they were above the law.

On and on the emails and letters came in, primarily from those who said they were affected by Scientology.

These people saw themselves as victims of Scientology - and they provided incredible detail about the workings of this organisation.

Having read their statements, I subsequently met with many of the people who provided them.

I knew I had to do whatever I could to help.

These victims of Scientology described a two faced organisation.

There is the public face of an organisation founded in 1953 by the late science fiction writer L. Ron Hubbard that claims to offer guidance and support to its followers.

And there is the private face of an organisation that they say abuses its followers and viciously targets its critics.

Having researched the cult I discovered that action had been taken against them in a variety of jurisdictions, in Europe.

I also discovered that in the USA a number of former high ranking Scientology executives had broken their silence about the organisation, talking to the St Petersburg Times newspaper in Florida where Scientology's international headquarters are located.

The executives said they had witnessed the head of the organisation David Miscavige assault staff members dozens of times and they said he also urged others to commit assault.

The executives also claimed the organisation had used blackmail and threats against former members and perceived critics of the organisation, and that the organisation has knowingly, repeatedly obstructed justice.

Claims were also made that information provided to the organisation by members during what is known as 'auditing sessions' - which are a crude hybrid of confession and counselling – and for which the organisation claims so-called 'priest penitent privilege' - was then used to blackmail and manipulate members.

I wondered what could be done through legislation that could help curb the alleged abuse.

The letters received by me, which were written by former followers in Australia, contain extensive allegations of crimes and abuses that are truly shocking - crimes against them, and crimes they say they were coerced into committing.

There were allegations of false imprisonment, coerced abortions and embezzlement of church funds, of physical violence and intimidation, blackmail and the widespread and deliberate abuse of information obtained by the organisation.

It was alleged that information about suspicious deaths and child abuse had been destroyed, and one follower had admitted he was coerced by the organisation into perjuring himself during investigations into the deaths of his two daughters.

These victims of Scientology claimed it was an abusive, manipulative organisation.

It didn't sound like an organisation that should be receiving support from the Australian taxpayer in the form of tax exemptions because they claimed to be a religion.

Australian law basically provides blanket tax exemption for any organisation that claims to be a religion or a charity.

I thought this definition was too broad.

After failing to convince my parliamentary colleagues about the need for an inquiry into the specific allegations of abuse by the Church of Scientology, I decided to introduce into the Senate what is called a Private Senator's Bill. It sought to restrict access to tax exemption for organisations that are shown to be causing public harm.

The creation of the Private Senators Bill led to a Committee Inquiry into my Bill, during which took significant evidence from both critics of Scientology as well as supporters of the organisation.

The Committee also heard from experts in taxation, other groups, more mainstream churches as well as the New Zealand and UK Charities Commissions.

I was pleased to see many of the major religions and charities which gave evidence supported the idea of a Charities Commission.

Indeed many argued it would protect real charities and religions which, on balance, provide benefit to the community.

At the same time as the inquiry my office assisted a number of individuals to launch provide evidence to the police that has led to criminal investigations into the Church of Scientology for specific allegations.

These investigations are continuing.

There is also an investigation into alleged labour abuses that we managed to assist in bringing about, which is expected to report back later this year.

As an Independent politician with no affiliation to any political party in Australia, I was never sure, how the major parties would treat my calls for an overhaul of our tax system.

But I was pleased to say, by the end of the Inquiry all the major parties agreed to support the creation of a Charities Commission in Australia that would weigh up public good and public harm considerations before deciding which groups should get tax exempt status.

I see this as a major victory, given the extraordinary evidence of public harm caused by some many organisations.

It's my belief the new Australian Charity Commission will be very unlikely to offer tax-payer support to cults that clearly do significant public harm.

The Committee also recommended that the Australian Federal Attorney-General should also investigate the creation of specific laws to deal with abuse in cults, similar to those in France, and I believe this will happen.

We are still awaiting the results of those criminal investigations, but I believe they are being taken seriously by the Australian authorities.

And I still have more to do, some of which I am unable to talk about at this time.

When I began my work in this area, some claimed that it was some kind of religious persecution.

It wasn't and it isn't.

I simply believe that tax-payers shouldn't fund abuse by anyone, even if they claim to be a religion.

And in relation to the other criminal matters, I argued being a religion didn't stop paedophile priests in the Anglican and Catholic churches from eventually being brought to justice.

As I have said previously, in Australia there are no limits on what you can believe.

But there are limits on how you can behave.

It's called the law. And no group or individual should ever feel they are above it.